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ABSTRACT

One composition teacher's experiences with the pluralistic student body of a two-year college led him to question the value of higher education, in particular writing and literature. Most current literature teachers were trained in the principles and methods of New Criticism, and most have found that these approaches are not adequate for their classrooms. Post-structuralist theory, however, which holds that there can be no pure signified, only the chain of signifiers, bears directly on what literature professors ought to be doing. Deconstruction (as put forward by Jacques Derrida) raises the issues of determinate versus indeterminate meaning and of authority in relation to meaning. Similarly, professors' approaches to the fictions of literature must not promise fixed verities; rather, they must engage with students in the processes of making truth by an individual's own actions and sayings--they must help students become empowered. The constructive side to deconstruction is represented by the philosopher Richard Rorty, who sees truth as created by the constant process of stretching beyond the limits of normal discourse. Language in this view is the instrument and mark of creative ordering, and people are agents struggling to maintain their freedom. In sum, recent movements in critical theory are rich with pedagogical implications. Common to them all is a questioning of traditional bases of authority. Theory can help bring into fuller and more careful articulation the realities of teaching in a two-year college. (ARH)

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Old Premises and Old Promises:
Contemporary Critical Theory and Teaching at the Two-Year College

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The president of my college, Union County College in New Jersey, has recently found it useful to describe my background to various audiences inside and outside the college. As he often explains, I hold a Ph.D. in literature from Rutgers University. I was for four years chairman of the largest department at the college, the English/Fine Arts/ Modern Languages Department. I have done post-doctoral study at Princeton University and at the School of Criticism and Theory at Dartmouth. I am one of the designers and founding faculty members of our Honors Program. He points all this out as a contrast to what I am now doing for a living, implementing a grant which has, among other things, created a high school for minority students on our main campus. His implication is that if I have been willing to almost completely abandon the profession I have trained for, this controversial grant project must be crucially important, despite the criticism and even incredulity it often generates among college and community constituencies.

What strikes me most about the president's use of me as a public relations point is his assumption, never questioned by any audience I have heard him address, that my involvement with secondary education and with minority issues in education is somehow at variance with my training. At a glance, I suppose he appears right, though some elements of that training were apparently subversive enough not only to allow me to experience a continuity in my career, but even to see my current work as an enactment of much of the

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so-called literary theory that I have studied in recent years, theory often deemed irrelevant to teaching and working at a two-year college. But my experience and my training lead me to view the two-year college as a unique opportunity to combine theory and practice, as a place where theory and practice can interpenetrate and become mutually validating. What other institution in American education would pay me to spend a summer studying with J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and Elaine Showalter, knowing that I would soon be struggling with such practical concerns as school buses and physical education classes for fifteen year old potential drop outs?

I recall that when I arrived in 1977 at what was then a private two-year school called Union College, with my doctorate in hand and with eight years of experience teaching at a high school and at four-year colleges and universities, I was shocked by the students in my classrooms. Some were older than I was. Many seemed emotionally fragile, some clearly disturbed. Some were working full-time while trying to squeeze in as many as fifteen credits per semester. Even the supposedly "traditional" students, the 18 and 19 year olds, did not match my tradition. Some were at school only to placate their parents. Many had weaker skills than I had encountered in my high school teaching experience. Yet there we all were, together in one room, working through the same syllabus I had used most recently as a teaching assistant at Rutgers University, reading selections from the same canonized anthologies. Yet the only similarity between the classes at Rutgers and at Union was racial: almost all students in my classes were white.

Why were they there I had to ask myself? What did they want out of Union College? Why especially were they making such demands on their time, and why were some continuing in an educational system which had told them for

so long that they were inadequate, that they were failures? What was the promise the college was holding out, and how did my course contribute to its realization? Answers did not come quickly.

In 1982 Union College became Union County College, a fully public comprehensive community college. This change in status accelerated a shift in the ethnic make up of the student body as the college expanded, adding campuses and seeking more delibrately to serve the black and hispanic population of its county. UCC also now offered more career and technical education, and faculty grappled with the question of how much or how little humanities education should be included in such curricula.

My own questions intensified. What specifically do we claim are the benefits of education in the humanities, especially in writing and literature? What is literature? Why do we teach it? Why do we (or did we) require it in so-called liberal programs of study? What can it and can't it do for students? Allan Bloom now laments that students no longer "hope that there are great wise men in other places and times who can reveal the truth about life" (34). Is that what literature is, a repository of unchanging wisdom articulated by men? Secretary of Education William Bennett believes we have lost a cultural legacy and must reclaim it by struggling against the intrusions of those he recently called "trendy lightweights" ("Bennett," A19). Can great books constitute this legacy? Whose legacy was it and is it? Does this legacy belong in the same way to a nineteen-year old white male from the suburbs as to a nineteen-year old black male from the city? To a nineteen-year old female, black or white? To a forty-five-year old female returning to education? To Hispanic and Haitian students? To Asian and Nigerian and Lebanese and Egyptian and Palestinian and Iranian students? All

of these students and others are in my classes together. What is the goal of a literature or composition course for these or any students? To pass on a legacy derived largely from Great Britain? To teach correct standard American English? Standard for which Americans? Is my composition class a microwave melting pot, or a cultural filtration system? Does it provide quick access to a job, or is it a culturally empowered barrier to success in the American society? Do we require this course in American language to help each student use language more effectively for his or her own purposes, or to promulgate dominant cultural values? Such questions are more urgent at, and to some extent grow out of, the two-year college, with its assumptions that higher education is for everyone. Does America really believe that? Education of what kind, or in what sense?

I continue to ask these questions which grow out of my daily experience at a two-year college, where I work with fifteen year old black and Hispanic high school freshmen and with college honors students from eighteen to seventy years of age. These are also the kinds of questions that grow out of contemporary literary theory, and it is that conjunction which allows me to see my current projects at the college as continuous with and informed by my professional training and theoretical interests. It is that conjunction also which allows me to see that the two-year college can be the vanguard of American education if we enact the insights of critical theory, and if we refuse to hold out old promises based on old premises about what education can and should do for people.

Many , perhaps most, of us teaching literature today were trained in the principles and methods of New Criticism during our graduate study. And most of us have since found that New Critical approaches are not adequate to the

classrooms we teach in. New Criticism, initiated by the Modernist literary projects of T. S. Eliot and translated into pedagogical method by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren among others in the 30's and 40's, emulated the supposed objective approach of the sciences. It viewed the literary work as an isolated artifact to be examined as one might examine a vase of unknown origin. It assumed, among other things, that such an object had a universal value independent of its origins or the situation of its contemporary reception. Moreover, it assumed that the alleged universality and timeless qualities of such objects were connected with universals of human nature, and that study of literary artifacts could not only tell us about that nature but could contribute to its highest realization. But I have found, as have many of my honest colleagues, that students who arrive at college without the faith that literature is valuable in and of itself seem unresponsive to discussions of the text as an isolated icon of finely balanced ambiguities and internal relations. And surely we all know, even without resorting to melodramatic historical examples, some less than fully realized human types who know and teach and profess to love literature. Surely all of us teaching literature at two-year colleges, and probably most of our colleagues at four-year colleges and universities, have questioned and altered our critical stance, with more and less deliberate thought, understanding and willingness, in response to the demands of our newly pluralistic classroom audience. Perhaps, too, we have questioned our implicit promises about the humanizing effects of literary study.

I have found that post-structuralist theory speaks clearly to the shifts I have made in response to very pragmatic realities in my professional and philosophical life. In the 1960's, just as structuralism was becoming popular

in America, Jacques Derrida's critique of structuralism arrived. His essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" argued that behind the work of structuralists like Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss, is the notion of an original signified. Derrida denies this original as the source of meaning, pointing instead to a chain of signifiers as productive of meaning. There can be no pure signified, only the chain of signifiers. To assert otherwise is to posit a "transcendental signified." If we believe we have located such a thing, we must deconstruct our notion to discover the contradiction in our discourse. Always, we must resist the notion of a transcendental signified. Such resistance is a key concept in Derrida's radical and political system. The concept of something behind words and free from words has, he thinks, captured Western philosophy; he calls this concept "logocentrism," and he opposes to it "*différance*," with an "A," a non-word coined to combine the spatial difference between words and the temporal deferral of meaning he sees as essential to meaning in language. Meaning is never present as a signified but is deferred to next in the chain of signifiers. *Différance* must be a non-word to decrease the risk that it will itself be taken as the transcendental signified. To prevent us from seizing on *différance* in this way, Derrida constantly moves to new terms, "non-synonymic" terms as he calls them. He wants terms unstable to avoid hierarchies of meaning implying privileged things outside the system. Such privileging would stultify thought and allow tyrannical forms to hold sway--patriarchy, or Eurocentrism for example. (For useful overviews of Derridean deconstruction, see Culler, Leitch and Bloom et al.)

The deconstructive act is applied to texts which ought make clear that the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary and that meaning is

endlessly deferred, but which imply otherwise. Literary works are such texts most fully because, while our cultural expectations would like to locate a fixed meaning embodying some glimpse or promise of an unchanging Truth, the tropological nature of literary language creates *différance* as an endless movement, a movement allowing for play, for playing with meaning. Play in Derrida means refusing the notion of the transcendental signified in language; it means opening up meaning to the play of *différance*. Meaning is not somewhere, fixed, closed, waiting for language to capture it. We must resist the metaphysical tendencies of our language. We can't succeed, but we must maintain the tension of opposition to prevent any power group from claiming to know the essential nature of the signified. Thus Derrida's political significance. Keep disrupting the system by play. Literature is the disruption of metaphysical systems by play. Politically, power dictates the signified of "good" and oppresses all else, but literature resists this tyranny of meaning, and so it is (and because it is) on the margin always, decentering meaning and power.

Derrida might seem a long way from the classrooms most of us teach in, but his thought bears directly on what we ought to be doing. Deconstruction raises the issues of determinate vs. indeterminate meaning and of authority in relation to meaning, and those questions bear directly on any interpretive activity. What are we doing when we interpret? Must we accept utterly diffused meaning? Must students be permitted to read texts in idiosyncratic ways? Should we, or can we, provide the "correct reading?" Hazard Adams, at an NEH/CCHA summer institute, offered a useful distinction between metaphysical and mediational interpretation. We can't simply declare the meaning of a text as if that meaning is a metaphysical reality revealed to

English teachers in graduate school; that would be bad pedagogy and bad philosophy. We must, instead, provide familiarizing mediation. We must offer what J. Hillis Miller calls "a method of reading in action" (2). We must show by our methodology not the uncertainty but the open-endedness of interpretation. The interpretive activities in our classroom generate discourse. We must convey that such discourse is never shut off, that that is why we continue to study the same texts repeatedly, why each age, each generation, each section of English Composition or of a literature survey, must engage in the ongoing conversation and creation of meaning. Especially in two-year colleges, where our commuting students and our preoccupied part-time students are missing the sense of an intellectual community so important to the college experience, we must engage them in the "cultural conversation," because if we don't, they may never understand the relations between language and power, between controlling meaning and controlling one's life. They may never understand the crucial role of language in culture and politics. Or they may understand it all too well and see education in America as the conservator of white European cultural power. By engaging them in mediational interpretation, we encourage them to resist imposed meanings and to keep their minds and themselves free by resisting the imposing structures of language.

We must empower our students by putting into action in our classes a critical method of discerning fictions, and their overt and covert structures and oppressions. Our approaches to the fictions of literature must not promise fixed verities; rather, we must engage with our students in what William James called the processes of "veri-fication" (133), of making truth by our actions and our sayings. Literature offers us not the discovered

unchanging Truths of Nature or Culture, but a tentative and selective shaping in language which makes certain claims to truth and may imply others left unexamined by the text itself. The study of literature does not offer entrance to the mainstream culture as if it were a country club. Such promises about the benefits of liberal education are false and dangerous. Rather, critical reading and writing and discussion in response to literature offer the interpretive skills of judging truth claims and a critical scepticism about the oppressions and exclusions inherent in any fiction. Such scepticism must especially be directed at the humanly created hierarchies we read as reality and use as a rationale for elitism and cultural dominance. Finally, we can empower our students by teaching them a language game, call it literary criticism, by acknowledging that other language games have other rules and that no single game can be privileged absolutely in its claims to truth. By empowerment I mean allowing students to keep as full a range of voices as possible with the understanding that manipulation and control of those voices will constitute whatever power is available to them. I mean teaching students to remain at least resistant to the pressures of the dominant cultural fictions which will try to define and contain them, especially those fictions which hold out the promise of entry into the country club of mainstream culture at the price of assimilation and loss of critical perspective. These empowerments are the goals of a deconstructive approach to texts.

There is a constructive side to deconstruction, and I see it growing out of the work of American philosopher Richard Rorty. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty deconstructs analytic philosophy, the tradition he calls "systematic" philosophy and traces through Locke, Descartes, Kant, Russell

and Husserl. As does Derrida, Rorty finds these philosophical projects trapped in an epistemology based on theories of representation, theories which locate truth in external reality which the supposed "mirror of the mind" must accurately reflect for contemplation by the mind's alleged "inner eye." He contrasts the efforts of these systematic philosophers to decide once and for all the knowability of things and the certainty of knowledge with what he calls the "edifying" philosophies of Dewey, Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Freed from notions of representation of absolute truth, these philosophers engage not in judgments about the legitimacy of knowledge but in "abnormal discourse," discourse which attempts to describe a sense of questioning, a sense that current "normal" descriptions of reality are incommensurable with our experience of it. Truth in edifying philosophy is not foundational, not based on some bedrock certainty of the accurate internal representation of external reality. Rather, the constant process of stretching beyond the limits of normal discourse creates truth, according to Rorty, creates, that is, justified belief, belief justified by the norms of the discourse which created it, which must in turn be challenged and gotten past by abnormal discourse. Rorty calls the truth-making process a cultural conversation, and argues that "To see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately" (378). Language in this view of truth making becomes not a barrier to accurate description but the instrument and mark of our creative ordering. And people in this view become not objects but agents struggling to maintain their freedom.

The teaching implications of social constructionist theories of knowledge

such as Rorty's are immediate and pragmatic. As Ken Bruffee explains in an excellent essay in College English, "Placing language at the center of our understanding of knowledge and of the authority of knowledge, [social constructionist thought] thereby places reading and writing uniquivocally where...it belongs, at the center of the liberal arts curriculum and the whole educational process" (778). So deconstruction is not, in my view, the nihilistic denier of values and judgment it is sometimes accused of being. On the contrary, it locates the responsibility for value, meaning and judgment where it belongs, in our human activities of shaping the world for our comprehension. And it makes our responsibility as well the use and abuse of power to maintain privileged positions through oppression of others by created truth. It does not allow us to pass the buck to a higher or more abstract authority. We are what we make ourselves, and others are only what we make of them if we become enslaved to our own meanings, or to those of the more powerful among us. Disruption by play, resistance, abnormal discourse, these are the skills we must teach and must keep alive in our disciplines, ourselves and our students.

Assuming that I have been deconstructed and then socially constructed all over again, what should be the outcomes of any composition or literature course I teach? Questioning universal knowledge, questioning culture as a static entity to be revered for its humanizing and liberating effects undermines much traditional subject matter and teaching method. Our pluralistic student audience has already made us change. (Or, if we cling to supposed traditional and elitist verities about who should be educated and why, it has made us despair, deservedly; and those who have so despaired have indeed committed the unforgivable sin.) Current theory can show us the

wisdom and honesty of such change. "Marginal voices" and excluded or silenced voices can help us see where our central cultural values are, can keep us aware that they are arbitrary and can force us to consider at whose expense such values are maintained. If knowledge is, as Rorty says, socially justified rather than an accurate representation of what is out there in the world or beyond, then power is the major issue-- who has the power and what do they claim is True and Good? Once again, the marginal decentering forces are crucial to keep power from freezing knowledge in static modes to maintain its own dominance. Literature and the other arts and, potentially, everyone's writing, can constitute counter discourse, the necessary deconstruction of cultural dominance, the deferral of meaning which keeps the conversation going and the culture growing. Without these forces, knowledge solidifies into oppression. The danger lies not in moral relativism or cultural pluralism; the danger is failing to realize the non-foundational nature of knowledge. If we admit that knowledge is of our communal making, we can empower ourselves and our students in the educational enterprise.

But what do I really want my courses to accomplish? At the end of my course in anything, I want students to be aware of the power of fictions, the power of the imagination to create meanings and to impose those meanings on our perception of the world. I want them to be aware that meanings created by others dominate their lives, and that they must resist these acquired meanings and strive to create their own, or someone else, the culture at large, will continue to do so for them. I want to shake their faith that anything written is True, with a capital T, and that literary writers have a special gift for revealing upper case Truth. I want them instead to engage in a dialogue with the texts and about the texts, to see that the texts we

experience are in dialogue with one another, and to contribute meaningful texts of their own to that dialogue. I especially want them to question the pervasive inherited dichotomies in our thinking, the easy either/or's we use to organize our thinking, but which we then read as hierarchies, mistake for reality, and use to justify and defend our embattled selves.

When I articulate these goals, I am immediately confronted by the paradox of teaching students to question acquired ideas, traditional structurings of thought. In such a context, what is the source and what are the limits of my authority? Where are the boundaries of my responsibility as a teacher, and how do they relate to the role as a learner that my own course goals impose on me? How can I simultaneously teach with authority and acknowledge my own biases, biases of culture, of gender, of specialized training? How can I resist the biases that shape me as an interpreter of texts? Can I be one of the forces my students must resist and question, and simultaneously the judge of their performance?

Some specific critical projects informed by contemporary theory, especially feminist projects, have shaken me out of my traditional approaches sufficiently, sometimes by making clear the tenuousness of my presumed authority, to help me get out on the edge where my precarious balancing act can become a performance, not just a methodology but a demonstration of method in action for my students.

Recent movements in critical theory are rich with pedagogical implications. What is common to them all is a questioning of traditional bases of authority, something many of our non-traditional students have been doing for some time. Each of these critical theories leads to a questioning of the traditional canon, for example, a process many of us have been through in

an effort to engage students who every day live the exclusions recent theories point out, whether those students are fifteen year old black high schoolers at a predominantly white college, women who have been told that education is important for their brothers but not for them, or Third World students for whom cultural imperialism is far more concrete than theoretical. Interpretive authority is also questioned in each critical theory, and again many of our students have forced us to do the same as we try to explain to them and to ourselves why we value one text or reading over another. But perhaps most significantly, recent theory validates our sense that nothing in education is more important than our efforts to give students power over their own language, to free them from the prison of inarticulateness and the tyranny of meanings imposed on their lives by those in control of the media and of cultural institutions, including colleges. Our teaching practice will no doubt continue to be shaped more by necessity than by theory, but theory can help bring into fuller and more careful articulation the things that are out there already, at the center of our professional lives in the two-year college.

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